A voice to our nation

by David Phillips

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Courage in a Hostile World – the story of FamilyVoice Australia

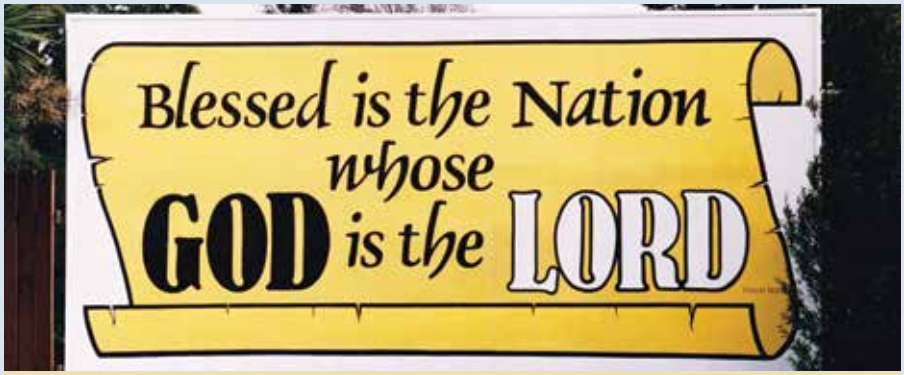


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My wife Ros and I were driving along in our rental car during a 1990 holiday in New Zealand. We were enjoying the majestic scenery when suddenly we saw it – a large billboard saying: 'Blessed is the nation whose God is the LORD!' (Ps 33:12)

It challenged my thinking: What does it mean for a nation to serve God?



This NZ billboard got me thinking: What does it mean for a nation to serve God?

Since committing my life to Christ as a university student, I have known the life-changing liberty of knowing God's forgiveness through Christ's atoning death. My life has been enriched through the indwelling power of his Spirit and his gift of eternal life.

Individual people can have a personal relationship with their heavenly Father through his Son, empowered by his Spirit – but what about communities? How can a nation have a relationship with God?

As I reflected on the question, I recalled that God says a lot about nations in the Bible. He promised Abraham that his descendants would become a great nation and be a blessing to all the nations of the earth.[1] Moreover God declared a change to his name: from Abram, meaning *exalted father*, to Abraham, meaning *father of many*, as a reminder of this promise of nationhood.[2]

Through Moses, God declared that his people would become 'a kingdom of priests and a holy nation'.[3] As a *holy nation*, Israel would be separate from other nations and dedicated to serving him.

But God's vision for the nations was much broader than Israel. Through the prophet Isaiah, God declared: 'Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my inheritance.'[4]

Modern Egypt, which Ros and I visited in early 2012, shows little evidence of God's blessing. Alexandria was once a thriving centre of Christian scholarship, but today is in the grip of Islam. Since the revolution on 25 January 2011, and the election of an Islamist president in June 2012, Egypt slid further into poverty, unemployment and food shortages.

God calls his people to be 'a light for the nations'.[5] Jesus reinforced this destiny in the *Sermon on the Mount* when he said: 'You are the light of the world.'[6] After His resurrection, Jesus gave his disciples the Great Commission to 'disciple the nations'.[7] Ultimately, God's vision is to embrace all the nations of the world.

What does it mean to disciple the nations?

Discipling nations

The apostle Paul engaged with civic leaders at every opportunity. In his speech to the Greek philosophers gathered at the Areopagus in Athens, he affirmed that God had formed every nation on earth, 'that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him.'[8]

In letters, he wrote of Christ's authority over nations being 'far above all rule and authority and power and dominion'.[9] And he gave top priority to prayer for governments of nations: 'for kings and all those in authority'.[10]

Paul used his privileged status as a Roman citizen to influence Roman rulers on numerous occasions – before the Roman magistrates in Philippi,[11] before Claudius Lysias, the Roman tribune in Jerusalem,[12] before Antonius Felix, the Roman governor of Judea,[13] before Porcius Festus, who succeeded Felix as the Roman governor of Judea[14] and before King Agrippa.[15] Paul's final appeal to Caesar was no doubt in part motivated by the opportunity to influence the powerful ruler of the dominant Roman Empire.[16]

Certainly the Great Commission includes proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom of God, inviting people to respond in repentance and faith in Christ and mentoring them as they start a new life in him. The great missionary movement over the past two centuries has seen extraordinary growth of the Christian church.

But is there more to discipling nations?

In *Discipling Nations: The Power of Truth to Transform Cultures*, Darrow Miller argues that God's truth not only breaks the spiritual bonds of sin and death, but can free whole societies from deception and poverty.[17]

In exploring this question we should consider how Jesus taught us to pray. He told us to start praying like this:

> Our Father in heaven,
> hallowed be your name.
> Your kingdom come,
> your will be done,
> on earth as it is in heaven.[18]

What are the implications of these familiar words?

Honouring God's name

My dictionary says 'hallow' means 'honour as holy'. Biblical scholar William Barclay relates it to the Greek word *hagios*, meaning 'holy' or 'different' or 'separate'. He suggests the petition means: 'Let God's name be treated differently from all other names.'[19]

Barclay also says that in biblical thought, 'name' means much more than simply the name by which a person is called. It refers to 'the *nature*, the *character*, the *personality* of the person'. So the petition means: *Let God be given the unique honour that his nature and character deserve*. Barclay asks whether there is an English word to describe this –

and adds: 'There is such a word, and the word is *reverence*.'[20]

How then can a nation uniquely honour or revere God?

We can approach this question indirectly by asking: How can a nation honour anything or anyone? More particularly, what does the Australian nation honour?

Historian Russel Ward, in his influential book *The Australian Legend*, proposed that the greatest honour in Australian culture is given to *mateship*, from the spirit of the original ANZACs.[21] Rightly or wrongly, this view is reflected in the introduction to the book *Their Spirit, Our History* published by the Australian War Memorial:

> ANZAC Day is the day that Australians remember those who fought and died in all wars… Each year on 25 April we remember, in particular, the landing on Gallipoli in 1915 and honour the spirit of the original ANZACs. This spirit, with its human qualities of courage, mateship and sacrifice, continues to have meaning and relevance for our sense of national identity.[22]

National identity – is that what lies behind the celebration of Anzac Day? Of all the public holidays in the Australian calendar, it is Anzac Day that seems to resonate most strongly with the Australian heart – and it is growing.

Paradoxically, Australia commemorates a military defeat, whereas most other countries commemorate victories. Somewhere in the Australian heart, is there a memory of the sacrifice of Christ on the cross – an apparent defeat transformed into the unexpected victory of his resurrection?

The traditional Dawn Service ceremony includes distinctively Christian elements – a hymn, prayer or Bible reading and the raising of the Australian flag with its four crosses of Saint Andrew, Saint Patrick, Saint George and the Southern Cross. These elements celebrate Australia's Christian heritage and provide opportunities to honour God's name.

We can now envisage, even though through a glass darkly, how a nation can honour God's name. Symbols of our national identity and celebrations of our nation's history can touch the Australian heart and have the potential to honour and revere Almighty God.

As I ponder these things, I wonder: How can we involve our children and grandchildren in the celebration of Australia's heritage that honours God's name?

Advancing God's kingdom

When we pray, 'Your kingdom come', what do we expect the coming of God's kingdom look like?

Curiously, although the core of Jesus' message was the coming of the kingdom of God, he never defined it. He said it is like a mustard seed, like a treasure in a field, like a wedding banquet – but what is it? And why did the disciples never ask what Jesus meant by the term 'kingdom of God'?

Biblical scholar John Bright explains in his book *The Kingdom of God* that the disciples didn't ask – because they already knew![23] 'The kingdom of God lay within the vocabulary of every Jew. It was something they understood and longed for desperately.'[24]

While the term 'kingdom of God' does not occur in the Old Testament at all, the idea of the rule of God over his people is a constant theme. In particular, the people eagerly looked forward to a messiah: 'For unto us a child is born … and his name shall be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.'[25] Bright writes: 'the hope of Israel was the hope of the coming kingdom of God.'[26]

Abundant hope for the coming kingdom gripped the minds of Judeans following the Roman conquest of Jerusalem in 63 BC. Most Jews felt like slaves in their own land – subject to their oppressive Roman rulers. They still felt as their forebears had after returning from exile in Babylon centuries earlier: 'Behold, we are slaves this day; in the land that you gave to our fathers to enjoy its fruit and its good gifts, behold, we are slaves.'[27]



A veteran in the 2013 Sydney ANZAC Day Parade greets onlookers

In their distress, the Jews remembered how God had rescued his people many times in the past. When enslaved in Egypt, God called Moses to lead them to freedom.[28] When attacked by the Philistines, God anointed David as king to secure Israel's borders.[29] When they were exiled in Babylon, God moved the heart of Cyrus, King of Persia, to restore them to their land.[30] The Jews of Jesus' day longed for God to rescue them again.

The angel told Joseph that Mary would bear a son who should be called Jesus, 'for he will save his people from their sins'[31] – and the implications were national. New Testament scholar Tom Wright explains:

> That, to any first-century Jew, didn't just mean that individuals could turn to him and find personal forgiveness, though that would obviously be true as well. Read Isaiah 40 and Lamentations 4 again and see. Exile is the payment for sin, so forgiveness of sin means the end of exile.[32]

When Jesus started his ministry proclaiming, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand', what would people have expected? The answer is clear, as theologian David Seccombe explains:

> Jesus' listeners would have heard him announcing the end of their exile. Moses had warned that rebellion would lead to exile and scattering. Restoration must begin with reconciliation to God, but this would entail the end of foreign domination and the return of the scattered people. It also meant a new king, a new order, a new temple, a new peace and a new environment.[33]

National salvation from foreign domination was at hand – but how?

How God's kingdom comes

Some Jews expected a sudden and miraculous *appearance* of the kingdom of God, following an announcement in the temple: 'Your God reigns!'[34] Other Jews expected to fight 'the last great war against the forces of darkness … with the help of the angel armies of God… The final victory would bring about the fulfilment of God's promises to Israel, and they would rule the world.'[35]

What actually happened was neither of these. Tom Wright suggests that Matthew's Gospel was written to say:

> This is it! This is what we've been waiting for – even though we would never have thought it would be like this! … But now that it's happened, we can see that this is where it was supposed to be heading all along.[36]

In fact, Wright suggests that all four gospels 'are trying to say that *this is how God became king.*'[37]

Luke's two-volume account, in his Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles, portrays a clash between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Caesar. His account of Jesus' birth is set against the background of the Roman emperor Caesar Augustus asserting his authority by requiring a census.

Luke's account ends with the tables turned – Paul is in Rome, the seat of the emperor's power, 'proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord

Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance'.[38]

Between these bookends, Jesus faced a politically explosive question: 'Is it lawful for us to give tribute to Caesar, or not?'[39] Wright highlights the danger:

> Everybody knows that [Jesus] is leading a kingdom-of-God movement. In his day, in Palestinian Judaism, that meant political independence; and political independence meant, beyond a doubt, no longer being under Caesar's heel. People had been crucified, in living memory, for staging anti-tax rebellions…
>
> No doubt many of his hearers were hoping that he was going to lend his powerful support to their anti-Roman revolution.[40]

His profound reply, 'render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's', avoided a charge of treason.[41] But he was nevertheless accused (falsely) before Pontius Pilate of 'forbidding us to give tribute to Caesar'.[42] Wright says:

> As well as all the other elements in the gospel story, we must recognize this for what it is, a telling of the story of Jesus as the clash between the kingdom of God and the kingdoms of the world.[43]

John's gospel explains that the clash of kingdoms, at its core, was over truth and power.

The power of truth

When on trial before Pontius Pilate, Jesus spoke about his kingdom saying, 'For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth.' Pilate's cynical reply, 'What is truth?', exposed his own insecurity.

Without realising it, Pilate actually proclaimed to the world the truth about Jesus when he ordered the notice to be placed on the cross. Following standard practice for a condemned criminal, Pilate ordered the notice to state the charge that had led to the extreme verdict of crucifixion. In Aramaic, Latin and Greek, it said:

JESUS OF NAZARETH
THE KING OF THE JEWS

Earlier, the soldiers had mocked him, dressing him in a royal purple robe, placing a crown of thorns on his head and saying, 'Hail, King of the Jews!' In so doing they too had unwittingly acknowledged the truth, that he was indeed the promised King of God's kingdom.[44]

Jesus emphasised the central importance of *truth* throughout his ministry. He challenged people to say truthfully 'yes' or 'no' instead of using slippery weasel-words.[45] He told a Samaritan woman that true worship of the Father would be characterised by truth, not location.[46] He said 'the truth will set you free'.[47] And he contrasted this with the nature of the devil who 'has no truth' and is 'a liar and the father of lies.'[48]

Wright comments:

> The point about truth, and about Jesus and his followers bearing witness to it, is that truth is what happens when humans use words to reflect God's wise ordering of the world and so shine light into its dark corners, bringing judgment and mercy where it is badly needed.[49]

International Bible teacher Vishal Mangalwadi explained in an interview with the Centre for Public Christianity how Jesus' insistence on truth had a key role in shaping Western civilisation.[50]

Born, raised and educated in India, Vishal understands the cultures produced by Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim and Christian beliefs. He observed that the pursuit of truth is uniquely a Judaeo-Christian tradition.

> Christianity won the classical world – the Greco-Roman world – because that world was built on myth, like India and Hinduism… Christianity triumphed over the classical world because Jesus and the apostles unleashed the power of truth. So when Jesus says to his disciples that you will be my witnesses, they were not story-tellers or myth-makers; they were not mystics; they were not meditators; they were not coercing Christianity with the power of the sword. They were witnesses: this is what we have seen; we know what we heard … that Jesus died for our sin, was buried, rose again and ascended into heaven. They were witnesses of these facts.
>
> Christianity was based on empirical observations – what has been seen. It was truth. Christianity won by unleashing the power of truth. All the universities in the West were established by the church, because the church was committed to seeking truth. Our Hindu cultures didn't start … the university movement because those religions were based on mythology.[51]

Jesus' death on the cross was a double victory, achieving forgiveness of sins for those who trust in him and healing of nations that embrace truth as a founding principle.

The servant king

Jesus' encounter with Pilate dealt not only with truth but also with power.

Pontius Pilate, as governor of Judea, had the awesome power of the Roman Empire at his disposal. When Jesus was on trial before Pilate and didn't answer some questions, Pilate became frustrated. 'Do you not know that I have authority to release you and authority to crucify you?' he said.

Jesus denied his claim to power, saying, 'You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above.'[52]

Here again is the clash of two kingdoms –



Statue of the first Roman emperor, Caesar Augustus (63BC to AD14), who called himself the 'Son of God'

Pilate claiming the supremacy of Caesar and Jesus asserting the sovereignty of God. The clash is particularly poignant as the Jews demand the death penalty "because he has made himself the Son of God".[53] Of course, Jesus was widely recognised throughout his ministry as the Son of God – in the angel's message to Mary, during his temptation in the wilderness, by the disciples, and by Jesus himself.[54]

The significance of the title 'Son of God' in the Roman Empire is often overlooked. None other than emperor Caesar Augustus adopted the title 'Son of God' for himself, as explained by Sir Ronald Syme, widely regarded as the 20th century's greatest historian of ancient Rome.[55]

When Jesus was called the Son of God, he was using the same title as the highest office in the Roman Empire. In today's world it was the equivalent of being called president, prime minister or king. The clash of kingdoms is palpable.

When Pilate finds no guilt in him and suggests releasing him, the Jews argue a direct conflict between Jesus and Caesar: 'If you release this man, you are not Caesar's friend. Everyone who makes himself a king opposes Caesar.'[56]

Who won this clash of kingdoms? God did! He demonstrated his sovereignty through the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. This was not the military victory over the Roman occupation that many Judeans expected. Nor was it the miraculous appearance of the messiah that others expected. No, however unexpectedly, God's kingdom was established through the obedience of his servant:

> Christ Jesus, who … emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant … humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.[57]

Vishal Mangalwadi comments:

> Australia has a prime minister rather than a king as the main leader because of a revolution that Jesus began. When he put on the robe of a servant, took a basin of water, started washing the feet of his disciples and he said this is a new kingdom. Amongst the Gentiles, the rulers lord it over them, but I'm starting a new kingdom where whoever wants to be the greatest should become your servant.
>
> The kings of England began to lose their power. Servants began to increase their power. The first servant – prime minister means first servant – became the most important office and he didn't rule with a battalion of soldiers but with a battalion of civil servants. All of this comes from the Bible.[58]

We can now begin to visualise, again through a glass darkly, how to recognise and advance the kingdom of God inaugurated through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. His reign in a nation will be characterised, at least in part, by a profound commitment to truth over myth and to servanthood over compulsion.

As the fall of the atheistic world of Communism has shown, a nation built on lies and deception cannot stand. Neither can one relying on fear and force.

Can we envision how God's kingdom can be best advanced in 21st century Australia?

Doing God's will

One thing we do know about God's kingdom coming is that it fulfils the next petition in the Lord's Prayer: 'your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven'. God's reign is characterised by God's will being done on earth.

It is clear from the Gospels that Jesus expected his disciples to obey his commands. For example, Jesus said: 'If you love me, you will keep my commandments'.[59] And they did.

Why does God want people to obey his commandments?

The answer is clear for the commandment: 'Honour your father and mother'.[60] As the apostle Paul observed, this is the first commandment with a promise: 'that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land.'[61]

David Klinghoffer comments on this promise in his book *Shattered Tablets: Why We Ignore the Ten Commandments at Our Peril:*

> When children honor and revere parents, that makes it much more likely that the parents – the father in particular – will pass on beliefs about God and the ways in which He asks us to walk… James Dobson, for one, has it right in his book Dare to Discipline when he points out that, on Earth, in many ways, parents in their child's eyes stand in for God Himself. This, too, of course, is a priestly role. 'Young children typically identify their parents … and especially their fathers … with God. Therefore, if Mom and Dad are not worthy of respect, then neither are their morals, their country, their values their values and beliefs, or even their religious faith.' He argues the point persuasively in the arena of sex. If parents don't impress their ethical values on their children, no one will. And society will suffer, for sexual indiscipline has consequences outside the bedroom: 'When a man is devoted to one woman and one family, he is motivated to build, save, protect, plan, and prosper on their behalf. However, when his sexual interests are dispersed and generalized, his effort is invested in the gratification of sexual desires.' Providing historical confirmation of this, Dobson cites the research of a British social anthropologist, J. D. Unwin, who studied how eighty different civilizations rose, declined, and ultimately fell. Unwin found that, as a rule, while the rise to prosperity and power was associated with a culture of sexual restraint, the end was always preceded by a drifting toward sexual libertinism.
>
> Respect for parents, in other words, is a necessary condition for moral education, which is a necessary condition for a society's thriving, perhaps for its very survival.[62]

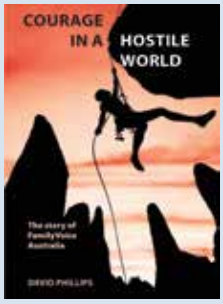
In other words, this commandment – to honour your father and mother – is for the good of the nation. And this is true of all God's commandments – they are all for our own good, and for the good of our families, our community and our nation.

Conclusion

Through his death and resurrection, Jesus inaugurated the kingdom of God. Full of grace and truth, Jesus offers salvation to sinners and healing to nations.

As I consider the future ministry of FamilyVoice Australia – a Christian voice for the natural family, the Christian faith and democratic freedom in Australia – my prayer is this:

> May our heavenly Father's name be honoured and revered.
>
> May his kingdom come and his will be done in Australia as it is in heaven.



Dr Phillips's book is available online from FamilyVoice Australia: shop.fava.org.au

or by phoning 1300 365 965.

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